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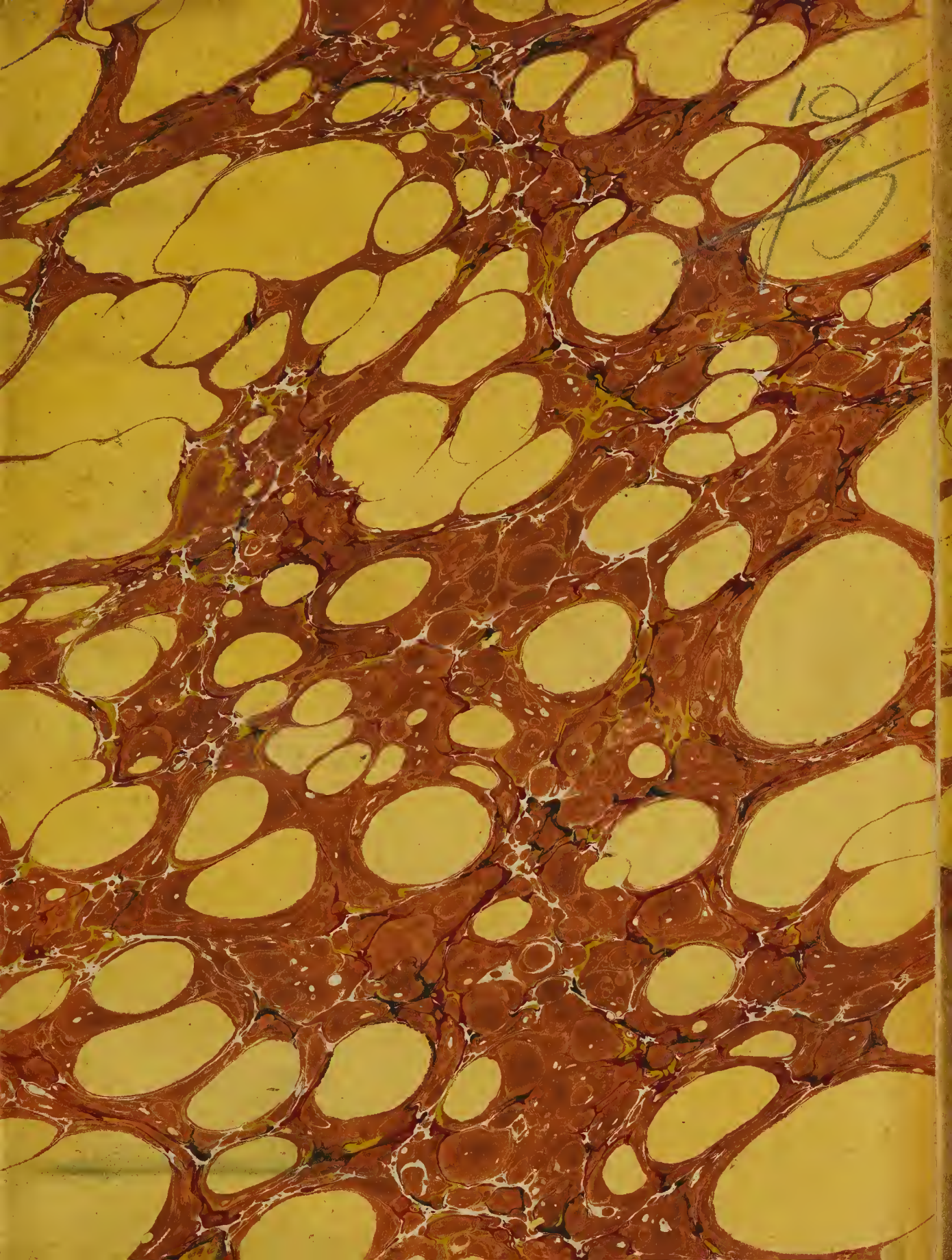
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Turner: the Dream-Painter.



J. M. W. TURNER, R.A.
(from a sketch by John Gilbert.)

HAMERTON'S
LIFE OF TURNER

A REVIEW

BY CHARLES HENRY HART



PHILADELPHIA

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FIFTY COPIES REPRINTED
FROM ROBINSON'S EPITOME OF LITERATURE
March 15th, 1879

ROBINSON'S EPITOME OF LITERATURE

PUBLISHED SEMI-MONTHLY.

SUBSCRIPTION, ONE DOLLAR PER ANNUM,
F. W. ROBINSON & COMPANY,
1309 CHESTNUT STREET,
PHILADELPHIA.

NEW YORK:
AUG. BRENTANO, JR.,
39 Union Square.

MONTREAL, CANADA:
DAWSON BROTHERS,
159-161 St. James St.

BOSTON:
A. WILLIAMS & CO.,
283 Washington St.

LONDON, ENGLAND:
HENRY F. GILLIG & CO., 449 Strand.

BERLIN, PRUSSIA:
EUGENE DZONDZ, Behren-Strasse, 67.

PARIS, FRANCE:
CHARLES LE GAY, 1 Rue Scribe.

ROME, ITALY:
MAQUAY, HOOKER & COMPANY

Philadelphia, Nov. 8. 1879.

Mr. Charles May, Aust.

Dear Sir:

May I send
you for review Langberton's
Book on Turner. If your
time will permit. I need
be greatly obliged to you for
article upon it, as you wd.
be thoroughly familiar with the
subject. The article of about
500 words wd. be best suited to
our columns, & need not
be so long.

Hoping for your kind attention,
I am Very Truly Yours
F. W. Robinson

TURNER: THE DREAM-PAINTER.

THE LIFE OF J. M. W. TURNER, R. A. By *Philip Gilbert Hamerton*. Boston, Roberts Brothers. \$2.50.

This compact duodecimo volume of four hundred pages, is a republication, in collected form, of Mr. Hamerton's monthly contributions to "The Portfolio," from January, 1876, to December, 1878, which fact, however, is nowhere stated in the book. It is a study of Turner, the artist, more than a biography of Turner, the man, yet it touches upon all the marked incidents of his uneventful life, and as an intelligently appreciative and critical memoir, is both welcome and valuable.

Joseph Mallord William Turner, was born in the very heart of London, on the day that the news of the battle of Lexington reached Philadelphia, April 23,

1775. His father was a barber, and unlike the usual course of men in his low condition of life, when the boy showed signs of aptitude in drawing, he encouraged and assisted him. At ten he was sent to school for a few years, but the dominie got no more education into him, if we can judge by what came out, than could have been forced into one of his father's wig-dummies; — "he was one of those persons," says Mr. Hamerton, "who seem born to be illiterate." But he had genius, and genius can defy teachings. He began to draw in his school days, and even then from memory and out of his imagination; later his sketches were exhibited around the walls of his father's shop. His first artist friend was Girtin, a boy of about his own age, who died in his twenty-eighth year, leaving behind him evidences of ability and genius which might have out-run his famous compeer. His art education was com-

menced in an architect's office, and subsequently he was under Sir Joshua Reynolds for a short time, with the intention, no doubt, of becoming a portrait painter;—his own portrait at the age of seventeen, in the National Gallery, now remains his only specimen in this line.

His first picture was exhibited at the Royal Academy either in 1787 or 1790,—there is a dispute as to which year is correct, Mr. Hamerton gives the earlier—and thereon down to 1850, the year preceding his death, he was an annual exhibitor, with the omission of four years, and during this period he contributed upward of two hundred and sixty paintings. His early pictures were in water color, and when he afterwards used oil, he never gave up the first, but would sometimes mingle the two in the same picture, and his sketches and studies for the engraver were always done in water colors. At twenty-four he was elected an

Associate of the Royal Academy, and three years later, became a full Academician. Thus at an early age he was fairly launched upon the sea of Art, and with most favorable winds; indeed, as the want of opportunity is what so often starves the aspiring genius, so the full field which Turner had from the beginning of his career, unquestionably was the great cause of his success. He was fortunate, too, in all his progresses through life; each step he took, each position he assumed or was forced into, was in the right direction, the best for ultimate success in the department he was to excel. He was without those trials which so often hamper the rising artist and dwarf his powers. His needs were few and his resources from the first were ample for his needs.

He was unmarried and lived a solitary life without even the society of friends, and many anecdotes are told of the unsuccessful methods his fellow artists would

devise, to gain access to his home and painting room. As he portrayed the hidden mysteries of nature as developed by his sensitive poetic imagination, so he affected a mystery about his art, and therefore it was that he refused admittance to his painting room, while his parsimonious habits forbade admittance to the social board. This love of solitude and of mystery abided with him to the last, and is well illustrated by the circumstances attending his death. Ill, he left his own home without even informing his attendants whither he was going, and dragged himself to Chelsea, where he died, December 19, 1851, under an assumed name. It was a singular whim, but perhaps akin to the crudities of his character and nature. In a contrast as direct as between the man and his works, was his choice of death-place and burial-place. His remains rest in St. Paul's Cathedral, where he desired to be placed

Beside his early master, the incomparable Reynolds. His funeral was one of pomp and ceremony. By his will he left a thousand pounds for a monument to himself, all his pictures to the nation, and his estate to found a charity for impoverished artists ; but his will, like himself, was made up of inconsistencies and could not stand the test of an English Court of Chancery. By an arrangement with his relations the nation got the pictures and they the money. Such is a glimpse of the man whose art-life Mr. Hamerton's volume embalms.

It can readily be seen from what has been said, that Turner was perhaps the most anomalous character of the present century : he was more than eccentric. He had a clearly defined dual nature : one of perfect refinement—in art ; the other of the grossest coarseness—in life ; and the one did not even tinge the other with its lights or shadows. He was

ambitious for fame, yet he paid no attention to the durability of his colors, or to the permanency of his pictures. He was not above gaining an effect by a trick. In one instance he cut out of black paper a dog and glued it on the part of a picture where a dark effect was needed, and on another occasion gained a glorious setting sun effect, by means of a red wafer. Mr. Hamerton gives the following anecdote in illustration of his conception of coloring:

“He was staying once in a friend’s house where there were three children. Turner had brought a drawing with him, of which the distance was already carefully outlined, but there was no material for the nearer parts. One morning, when about to proceed with this drawing, he called in the children as *collaborateurs*, for the rest, in the following manner. He rubbed three cakes of water-color, red, blue and yellow, in three separate saucers, gave one to each child, and told the children to dabble in the saucers and then play together with their colored fingers on this paper. These directions were gleefully obeyed, as the reader may well imagine. Turner watched the work of the thirty little fingers with serious attention, and after the dabbling had gone on for some time, suddenly

called out, 'Stop!' He then took the drawing into his own hands, adding imaginary landscape forms, suggested by the accidental coloring, and the work was finished."

Mr. Hamerton mentions an instance of Turner having covered the sky of one of his exhibition pictures with a wash of lamp-black, on varnishing day at the Academy, "in order that it might not spoil the effect of two portraits by Lawrence, between which it happened to be placed," and he exclaims: "Was there ever a more exquisitely beautiful instance of self-sacrifice?" But he omits to give its complement as narrated by Leslie, that when Constable exhibited his "Opening of Waterloo Bridge," it was placed next to a gray sea-piece by Turner. "Constable's 'Waterloo' seemed as if painted with liquid gold and silver, and Turner came several times in to the room while he was heightening, with vermilion and lake, the decorations and flags of the city barges. Turner stood

behind him, looking from the 'Waterloo'³² to his own picture, and at last brought his palette, and putting a round daub of red lead somewhat bigger than a shilling on his gray sea, went away without saying a word. The intensity of the red lead, made more vivid by the coolness of his picture, caused even the vermilion and lake of Constable to look weak. The great man did not come again into the room for a day and a half; and then, in the last moments that were allowed for painting, he glazed the scarlet seal he had put on his picture and shaped it into a buoy." This puts a very different complexion on the "self-sacrifice" of Turner. The "sacrifice" was to *Sir Thomas Lawrence, President of the Royal Academy*, and not to his brother landscape painter.

The works of Turner are familiar in this country principally through the reproductions of the burin, and there is no surer proof of his greatness as an artist,

than in the fact that when thus reduced to black and white they lose none of their grandeur and beauty. There are, however, at least three of his finest paintings here, and several of his water color sketches. In the Gallery of the Lenox Library, New York, may be seen his "Fingal's Cave in the Island of Staffa," (1832), and "A Scene on the French Coast with an English Ship-of-War Stranded," (1836), while the Boston Art Museum, possesses the celebrated "Slave Ship," (1840). This last picture has perhaps caused more vehement controversy, than any other of his pictures. Mr. Ruskin, who owned it for many years, wrote it "up" as was natural, and as he can so well do, and commended it near a dozen times in his "Modern Painters." He sold it to Mr. John Taylor Johnston, of New York, for an extravagant sum, and it formed one of the features of his collection. At the sale of Mr. Johnston's

pictures in December, 1876, it was sold for \$10,000, and taken to Boston, where it now is. The two specimens in the Lenox Gallery are thoroughly satisfactory works, but Turner can never be appreciated or admired, except by delicately refined and highly educated minds. His skies and seas are marvels; marvelous in conception, marvelous in execution, marvelous in effect. The water moves, you even feel the spray; the sky changes from clouds to clear. If it were only for his skies and seas, he would be a great artist, a great genius. A close critical analysis of his pictures shows the utter disregard he had for topographical conventionalities, or rather for topographical truths. He seems to have taken merely an instinct from the scene he assumes to delineate, and then to have wrought out his picture, with just enough of reality, to fasten upon it a name. His views of places are at best compositions from his

vivid imagination, or, as Mr. Hamerton says, "They have about the same relation to reality that our dreams do, when, we dream of some place that we have visited." They are painted dreams, but dreams with an order and an unity.

In what then does Turner's greatness consist? He was an inferior draughtsman, an uncertain colorist, an apostate to nature, and although Professor of Perspective in the Royal Academy, he foreswore all the rules of perspective, in his works. Where then is his merit? It is in his poetry, his imagination, his dreams; his unequalled power to delineate these intangible things upon canvas, so that the observer can read his truthful unreality, or, to quote Mr. Hamerton again, "It is the soul of Turner that fascinates the student, and not the material earth." That he was a great artist, a great painter, a great genius, there can be no doubt; but that he was "the greatest painter of all time,"

as Mr. Ruskin puts it, is laughably absurd. "In his appreciation of mystery in nature and his superlatively exquisite rendering of it," he may have excelled the artists of all time, as Mr. Hamerton claims, for he painted only his imaginations and succeeded in reflecting them. With the progress of art education the celebrity of the great artist will steadily increase. His works were admired when he died more than when he lived, and are appreciated to day more than at the period of his death.

With such a subject as this there can be no question as to what kind of a book Mr. Hamerton has produced, and it is his most important work, after his great volume, on "Etching and Etchers." The ninth and fifteenth chapters are wonderfully good, containing a clear analytical exposition of Turner's system of study, as disclosed by his sketches and drawings, and a consise and critical estimate of him

as an artist, with a review of Mr. Ruskin's unrestrained eulogiums upon him. These two chapters especially will well repay considerate study.

Turner had three distinct styles, each transition period being well marked by some important picture, and Mr. Hamerton gives a view of each, with much discriminate judgment. It is a field where he is thoroughly at home, and shows his full power as a writer and art critic. It seems to us that his greatest mistake, is in treating Turner almost exclusively as a landscape painter, and drawing comparisons constantly between his works, and the works of those masters who have excelled alone in that department of art, such as Claude and Richard Wilson; instead of considering him as a great marine painter, of whose master, Vandevelde, he himself said, "I can't paint like him." A remarkably singular omission, too, in a work of this character, is the failure to mention

the optical theory of Dr. Liebreich, as explaining some of the peculiarities of Turner's paintings. Taking it all in all, Mr. Hamerton has produced the soundest and most satisfactory study of Turner that has appeared.

Mr. Hamerton's style as a writer is very easy and flowing, quite conversational in its manner, but it has some great defects. His long intercourse with the French has fastened upon him too many French words, which he intersperses frequently through his text, where good "English undefiled" would have served him as well. Then there are many repetitions of the same thing, nearly in the same language, and some, to say the least, inelegancies of diction, which are not consonant with the dignity of the subject. The volume is well printed, embellished with nine plates etched by Brunet Debaines, and is of a handy size.







